

EMIGRANTS WEST

SUMMARY: Students will "meet" a typical pioneer family traveling the Emigrant Trail in the 1850s through a dramatic role-playing presentation.

GOAL: To introduce students to the hopes and hardships of a typical pioneer family traveling west in the 1850s

OBJECTIVES: Students will be able to describe: (1) A typical pioneer emigrant

Family who chose to make the trip west. (2) how they traveled, and (3) what hazards they faced.

GRADE LEVEL: Fourth, Fifth and Seventh

TIME REQUIRED: 30 to 45 minutes

LOCATION: Classroom

MATERIALS: Costumes for actors

SUBJECTS: History, Economics, Language Arts, Visual/Performing Arts

KEY WORDS:

Fort - a way-station to rest, make repairs, send and receive mail, and purchase or barter for supplies. These were not Army forts, but commercial establishments.

Dutch oven - a popular type of cast iron pot with lid that was used for baking and cooking directly on a campfire. Lewis and Clark used one on their expeditions. They probably got the name "Dutch" oven because Dutch salesmen supplied them to the emigrants.

Wagon - the main mode of transportation for the emigrants which was covered with canvas (painted for waterproofing) and was four by twelve by three feet deep. Wagons were purchased or built at home before departure. Iron straps reinforced stress points and iron rims on the wheels were used as tires.

Buffalo chips - dried buffalo wastes burned for cooking fires when wood was scarce on the Plains. Pioneer women were at first embarrassed to deal with them but were pleased to find they provided a hot, smokeless fire. Fires were built in a trough dug into the ground and pots were set across the sides of the trough.

Emigrants - families, traders, entrepreneurs, criminals, and seekers of religious freedom who journeyed to Mexican California and Utah, and the British-controlled Oregon Territory. They were called emigrants because they were leaving the United States as it then existed. The name "stuck" even after California was admitted to statehood.

BACKGROUND: Mountain men, fur traders, and explorers were the first Europeans to see the lands west of the Mississippi. By the early 1800s, their stories were contributing to a growing campaign to make the West part of the United States.

Factors that intensified interest in the new lands included economic depressions of 1837 and 1841, collapse of the international fur trade, British domination, missionaries anxious to spread Christianity, and the Mormons' New Zion in Utah.

It was not until 1841 that the first groups of emigrants left the banks of the Mississippi to head west. By 1843 nearly 1,000 had made the trip. Registers at Fort Laramie and Fort Hall showed nearly 400,000 travelers by 1852.

Guidebooks were soon available for the emigrants. Some had useful information; others were written and sold by people who never made the trip. The need for essential traveling items led to a flurry of trade at the main trailheads of St. Louis, Independence, and St. Joseph in Missouri and Council Bluffs in Iowa.

For the 2,000-mile trek, emigrants needed a wagon, tools, food stores, cooking utensils, bedding, and items for their new homes and businesses. Cash was needed to replenish supplies at the forts and for ferries and tolls. Everything had to fit in a 48 square-foot wagon bed. Sleeping was done outdoors or under a tent in bad weather.

Timing of departure was very important. Late spring was the preferred time because there would be water and grass for stock. Hopefully, the last mountains would be cleared before snowfall.

Landmarks were looked forward to, both to break the monotony of the trip and mark progress. Chimney Rock and Scotts Bluff marked completion of the first third of the trip. After a week's journey, Fort Laramie was reached. As migrants approached the Continental Divide, grass and water became scarce, the rough travel took its toll on the wagons, and buffalo herds--which supplied fresh meat and chips for fuel--became harder to find. Families were often forced to leave belongings along the trail to lighten the load.

South Pass was the halfway mark. Letters and diaries often mentioned that people were hardly aware they were on a pass at first, because of the gentle grade. Beyond lay a barren stretch, then the mountain passes that opened on California and the Oregon Territory.

At first, the Indians were curious, sometimes helpful, and anxious to trade with the travelers. There were few real stories of attacks, mainly on lone travelers. Stock and supplies did, however, disappear during the night on occasion. Resentment, frustration, and problems with some tribes increased later due to increased impacts on their lives from settlements, the railroad, and government policies.

Peter Lassen and William Nobles established trails leading into Northern California. Lassen hoped to bring weary newcomers to his Bosquejo Rancho (near present day Vina) where he had started a town and ran a small store. Nobles had scouted a better route, and was then

commissioned by Shasta City businessmen to establish, advertise, and lead a group through it. Lassen's trail acquired some derisive nicknames, due to the extra miles and reputation for getting people lost. Lassen himself had to be rescued at times. Nobles' trail contributed to the founding of the towns of Susanville and Redding. Both trails played a major role in shaping the development of Northern California.

INSTRUCTIONAL SEQUENCE: This activity requires that two students perform the skit while the rest of the class listens carefully. All of the students answer the three questions under "Assessment."

The following preparation needs to be done before the skit is ready to be performed.

(1) Review script. (2) Explain to the class that you would like two volunteers (one boy and one girl) to play the parts of pioneer emigrants traveling west for a skit to be performed before the class. Explain the reason for the skit. (3) Select actors. Skit Characters: Jacob and Ida Bell Taylor and their "baby." (4) Make or collect costumes. Jacob - old floppy hat and suspenders, beat-up shoes, worn shirt, and dungarees (there were no zippers in the 1850s). Ida Bell - bonnet or scarf, calico dress (to the ankles), apron, old shoes. Baby - doll or towel wrapped in a blanket. (5) Distribute scripts; practice roles. (6) Ask actors to write their lines on note cards OR prepare an overhead transparency of the script which can be projected on a screen behind the audience (a make-shift teleprompter). Use different colored pens for each actor's lines. You will need a "prompter" to move the script along for the actors. (7) Have the actors practice staging--entering the room, walking as if really tired, where to stop and speak to the audience, and exiting the room. (8) Once the actors are ready, announce to the class, "You are about to meet some important people--people who have decided to shape their own future by traveling 2,000 miles across the deserts, plains, rivers, and mountains of our country. The year is 1852; families are packing up and selling out to join the wagon trains in the westward migration. Most don't realize that they are helping to shape the future of the new frontier, California and the Oregon Territory." (9) Explain to the students that they need to listen carefully as they will have to answer some questions about the emigrants after the skit is over. (10) Begin the skit.

Suggestions for the teacher: (1) You may wish to begin the unit by asking the students if they were born in California, where their families (or ancestors) came from, and how and when their families emigrated to California. (2) If costumes cannot be borrowed or found somewhere, ask a few students to try making simple ones from felt, cardboard, or real calico and fabric glue. (3) If any of your students have seen the pioneer program at Lassen Park, they might be good candidates for this presentation. (4) If the "actors" can provide their own make-up to look dirty and sunburned, it would add a realistic touch. (5) You could also do this yourself as a monologue, by changing hats and voices. (It could be fun!) (6) Encourage the actors to stay in character despite some of the things their classmates might say. Suggest they "ad lib" some if needed.

EXTENSION/ENRICHMENT: Music - Listen to or sing popular songs from this time, such as songs by Stephen Foster or railroad and mining songs. Write some new verses to "Clementine" or "Sweet Betsy From Pike." Language Arts - Design or improve a mode of transportation; then prepare a three-minute sales talk for a group of prospective westward migrants. Videotape interviews with grandparents who have stories and keepsakes from their ancestors' migration to California. Social Studies - Research how the pioneers governed themselves while en route and how they dealt with the wrongdoings of others. Find out what the most common health problems were among the pioneers. What medical help, medicines, or herbal remedies were available to them? History - Use maps to explain how and when California and the Oregon Territory became part of the United States. Performing Arts - Students perform skits based on their own research of the lives of pioneer emigrants.

ASSESSMENT: Have the class answer the following three questions and then discuss their answers as a group. (1) Who chose to make the trip and why? (2) How did the pioneers travel? (3) What hazards did they face?

SKIT

Jacob: Well, howdy folks! I thought I saw a campfire out this way. Me and the Missus are scouting for some fresh water. Hope we didn't disturb you none. I'm Jacob Taylor and this here's Ida Bell with our baby. We're from Missouri...taking the Noble's Trail over toward Shasta City. Is that where you-all are from? Our group is staked out under the trees out yonder, resting the stock and starting dinner.

Ida Bell: Now, Jacob, don't go talkin' the ears offen these folks. I do apologize for interrupting your chores...I know I've got plenty of my own once we get back to camp....feedin' the oxen, washin' and mendin'. Jacob, you need to soak those wagon wheels...they got so dried out they shrunk and the iron tires just fell off!

At least I don't have to gather those buffalo chips for the fire anymore, like when we was out on the plains. Not a stick of firewood for miles! You all know what buffalo chips are, don'tcha? Well, like I was telling Mama in a letter, I wouldn't have touched them, not to mention talked about them to strangers before the trip, but that's what trail life does to a person. You do what you gotta do, or sometimes you just don't eat!

Jacob: Now look who's chattering up a storm! You'll have to forgive us, folks, but you're the first Californians we've met. After all these months on the trail, we're down right excited to be so close to our new land.

I was a printer back home and I'm aiming to start a newspaper in a California town. My press is crated up and going around the Horn on a ship bound for San Francisco. Should catch up with it by Spring. Don't mind tellin' you I couldn't find work back home...those cities are so crowded and dirty anyway, it seemed like making a new start was just the thing for my little family.

Ida Bell: I don't mind tellin' you this half of the little family was sorely tempted to turn right around and head back when we was on the plains. Why, that blisterin' sun made our faces peel and lips crack...the alkali water killed a few oxen in the group ahead of us. And the bad tempers!...men and women alike were using language I hope to never hear again. With no wash water, the baby's diapers had to be scraped and dried, then used again. Sure don't miss those dust storms...all day and all night...I thought I was going crazy.

Jacob: Heard tell of a few people who did go crazy. John Lewis's wife got so mad she set the wagon on fire! Abner Blackburn's missus just set herself down in the trail and refused to budge until he turned the wagon around, and they were all the way to South Pass...the half-way mark!

Ida Bell: Well, dear, she was broken-hearted about losing their child in that stream crossing. Can't say as I blame her. Stream crossings are bad enough...havin' to build a raft for the wagons, then haul them over one by one. The stock are forced to swim across and you can just imagine how stubborn they can be. It takes a full day, sometimes two...and still you lose a few animals. But to lose a child, well, that was more misery than she could bear.

I just can't bear it to see the graves along the trail...all those dreams...now turned to dust. Cholera's what did it mostly. I told Mama in my last letter, I said not to worry, we're takin' doses of a little something that was recommended for the cholera.

Jacob: We worried the graves might be from Indian attacks, but they haven't been a bit of trouble. Sometimes a horse or some food disappears at night, but mostly they leave us alone. We circle the wagons at night, but mostly to corral the stock, not cuz' of Indians. Course, we're in a big group...paid plenty to our guide, too.

Ida Bell: It was worth every penny, Dear. We heard a couple of folks travelin' alone got attacked, so we did the right thing.

Jacob: Packing light was the right thing, too. The wife spotted crates and boxes of beautiful things, china and furniture and the like, just litterin' the sides of the trail. People just couldn't carry 'em up those mountains.

Ida Bell: Jacob, Jacob, we must let these people be! You folks have been very kind, but we should let you get back to work. I need to start our dinner, anyway. At least the butter's made. I just milk the cow in the morning and hang the churn on the wagon. The swaying of the wagon churns up a nice little lump of butter just in time for dinner!

I'm sure happy my Jacob is on hiz' feet again. When he stumbled in that prairie dog hole and give his ankle a hard twist, why he had to ride in back o' the wagon! It fell to me to drive those onery oxen and set up the tent at night, all while holding the baby!

We should be in Shasta City by week's end! Soon I'll be cooking in our own home! Course, I had to leave all my pretty wedding china and silver with Mama; they wouldn't fit in the wagon. All I've got now is a kettle and an iron pot. Course, there's not much to cook in them...we've still got a bit of rice and beans left, some vingar for the scurvy, and flour and tea. We traded for some sugar and coffee back at the Fort, but they didn't last long. Why, the forts aren't Army forts at all! Just places to rest up and buy more supplies. Sometimes Jacob gets us something for supper, like a rabbit or a deer, but not too often.

Jacob: Well, Sugarplum, like I was tellin' you, game along the trail is getting harder to find. Why I heard that just a few years back, these lakes were covered with geese and ducks. Their wings made a thunderous roar when they took flight, and you could feel the breeze on your face. And I heard the fish were so thick in the streams you could cross over by walkin' on their backs. I guess it's not like that anymore, what with all the travelers and all...

Ida Bell: The register at Fort Laramie said that 30,000 people, 7,000 wagons, and 50,000 livestock passed through ahead of us! We'd better hurry on now Jacob, before all the land is taken up and spoiled, just like back home.

Jacob: Well, it's still better than back home. Such beautiful forests and clear streams, and such good soil! Us newcomers will remember to take care of the land, so what happened back home won't happen here. You'll see, Darlin'.

Ida Bell: I suppose, Dear. Why these folks here seem to be right prosperous, so maybe it will be better than back home. It would mean a lot to us to raise our children in a land with such promise. Now Jacob, we must go. Good-bye, friends. Thanks for the visit and please wish us well!

Jacob: So long! Good health and fortune to you!

(Exit)